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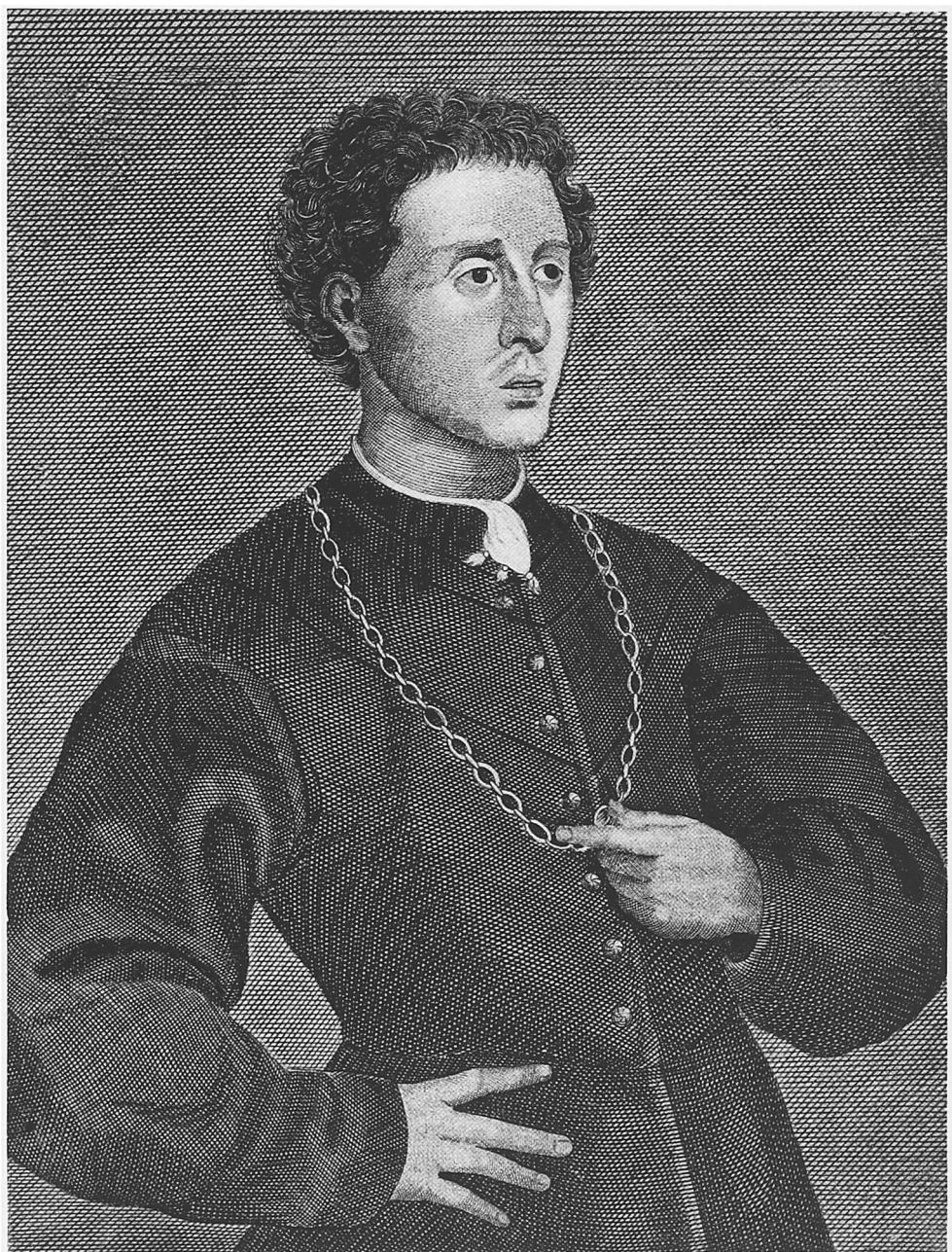
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Petrus Aretinus:
From the Painting by Titian

THE POET WHO LEVIED BLACKMAIL

FOREMOST among those writers who have rendered their names infamous by their scandalous lives and the character of their writings, stands Pietro Aretino, the illegitimate son of Luigi Bacci, and born in an hospital at Arezzo in Tuscany, on the 20th of March, 1492, the star of Cæsar Borgia being at the time in the ascendant in Italy. The country then, and long before, and long after, was divided into several small republics or kingdoms, no one of these being sure that its territory would not be invaded, or its fortified cities stormed, by some faithless neighbor within the next week. Public faith was as little to be counted on as private integrity; a taste for literature and a passion for the fine arts had arisen; but a devotion to æsthetics is not necessarily accompanied by purity of life; a sensuous disposition is rarely proof of the seductions of sensuality. The glory of a country is its possession of honourable and brave men and chaste women. Italy could then boast of many men not destitute of courage; but of the other good qualities, male or female, there was a scarcity. A certain author remarks, that they sometimes fought pitched battles with each other, on the tacit understanding that there was to be no killing; but they compensated for the small quantity of bloodshed by wounds in the back out of the battle-field. This is probably an exaggerated view of Italian economy three hundred odd years since.

Generally, the early printed works were such as had long lain in MS.; but when original pieces began to be issued, especially if couched in a taking style, with elegantly-turned phrases, they made quite a sensation, especially among such people as the acute, clear-headed Italians by whom the literature contained in the carefully preserved manuscripts of the middle ages was always highly cherished. This contributed to the undeserved success of Aretino.

There was a quaintness and a boldness about Aretino's literary style; and this, united with a spirit of intrigue and audacity, furnished his table with delicacies, his wardrobe with richclothing, and enabled him to hold levées and entertain guests of distinction and fine taste in his Venetian palace.

Theft and vagabondage distinguished his early life. With money stolen from his mother, he supported himself on his first excursion. He made his way afterward to Rome, travelling on foot, and sleeping by the roadside, and got employment in the house of the merchant-prince, Agostino Chigi; but was so sorely inveigled by the charms of a silver goblet, that he made it his own, and resumed his travels. Somehow he got under the protection of Cardinal San Giovani, who recommended him to the belligerent Pope Julius II. He would have nothing to say to him, and he is soon again found tracing a line through Lombardy by his disorderly

life, becoming a Capuchin in Ravenna, soon "casting his gown to the nettles," and again seeking Rome, rendered, by the artistic tastes of the new Pope, Leo X, a focus of attraction for all the scholars and artists of the peninsula.

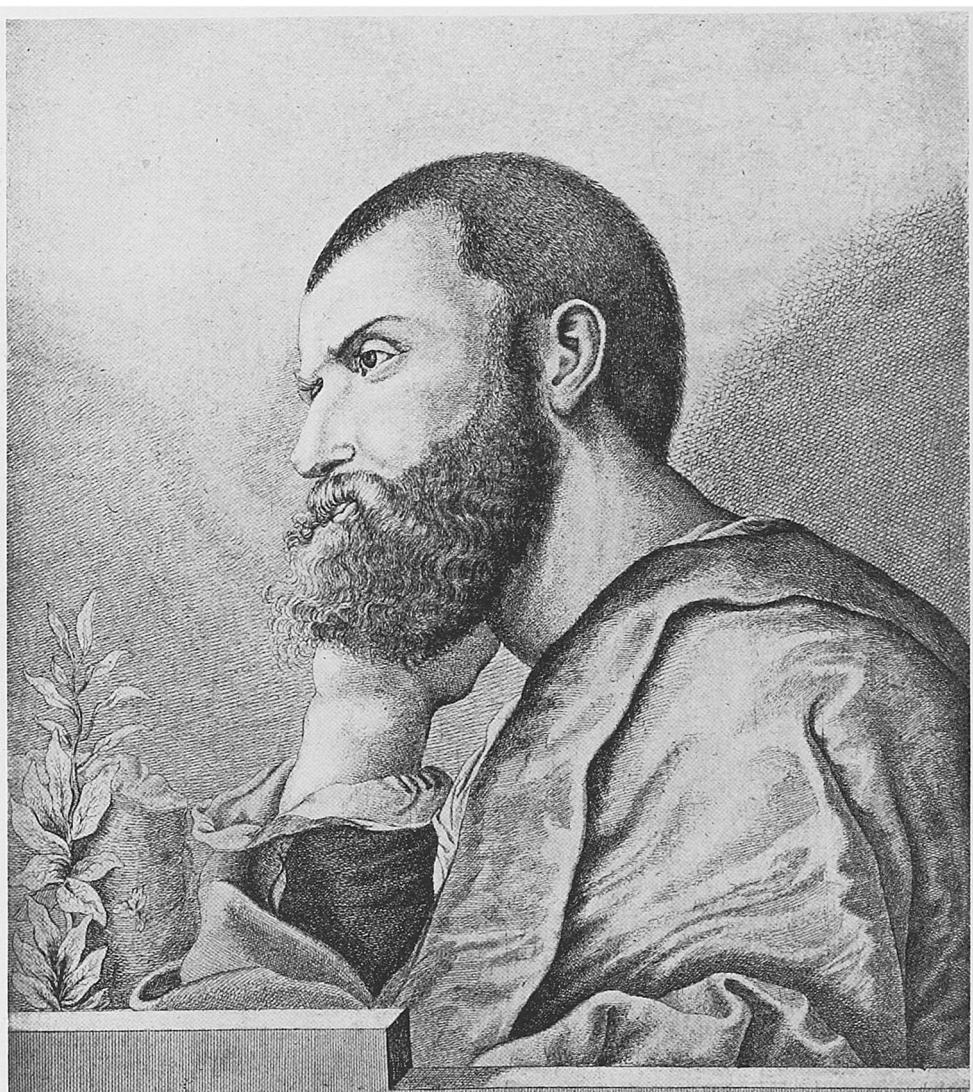
Now as page in the Papal household, did Aretino enter on a new phase of life, gliding through crowds of nobles, painters, sculptors, musicians, and makers of verses; his qualifications being a ready wit, eager passion, impudence in perfection, no education, intense pride, laziness, cowardice, and another darling vice or two. He began to compose adulatory sonnets, and procured some money and patronage thereby, and watched opportunities of complimenting the Pope and his cousin, Julius de Medicis (future pope). These manœuvres procured him money and a horse to ride, and he became the original, or at least a faithful copy of the "Beggar on horseback." Both Pope and cousin, however, were furnished with too good a taste to set a value on Pietro much above his deserts. So like an actor who cannot secure first-rate parts in the capital, he determined to make a tour in the provinces, good clothes on back, flattering sonnets in hand, and the high favour in which he stood with the Pope ever on his lips. Thus provided, he visited Milan, Bologna, Mantua, Urleino, Ferrara, repeating poetical eulogies on the powers in whose presence he happened to stand, and bitter satires on those whom he knew to be under their displeasure.

Aretino's rambling and scrambling portion of existence ended with his entrance into the city of canals and gondolas, and that portion commenced in which both the comforts and luxu-

ries of life were abundantly supplied by his knowledge of the worse side of human nature, and the dexterous use he made of it. He did not depend on any one great patron. He propitiated every influential personage of his time by his adulations, or terrified them by his biting satire. The press of Venice would convey his praise and satire to France, Germany, Spain, and ultra-Venetian Italy; and amid the distractions of play, festival, debauch, he would keep his head clear, and pursue a systematic plan by which gold, rich furniture, rich dresses, and every available good, would enter his palace, and replace the outlay attending on a life of profusion the most reckless in appearance.

Let us take a glance at the appearance of things about our most immoral man and immoral writer during the hours devoted to seeing his friends and the public in his palace on the grand canal, Venice, any time between 1530 and the latter years of his pestilent existence. Entering from your gondola you ascend the marble steps of a magnificent flight of stairs, which conducts to the antechamber of the great hall of reception. This is amply furnished with statues, and some designs of Giorgione and Titian. Six young beauties, to whom politeness may assign the rank of wives to this Brigham Young of the sixteenth century, are employed at various elegant species of labour, one entertaining the visitors and her companions on the harpsichord. The portraits of some of these ladies of Aretino's harem may be seen in the extant collection of Titian.

Amidst the disorders and the prodigalities of his career, he kept a regular account of his receipts and expendi-



VERA EFFIGIE DEL POETA PETRO ARETINO.

ture, ever taking care that the credit side of his affairs should exceed the debit. When the latter threatened to make an undesirable approach to the figures of the former, his ready and exacting pen was put to use, and the gold crowns, and the rich stuffs, and the splendid ornaments found their way from Madrid, from Paris, from Ferrara, and from every capital whose lord did not relish an appearance in the next impudent satire of the Venetian sensualist. One of his great patrons, Giovanni de Medici having died, letters from Aretino came to sundry nobles of the house detailing his devotion to the great noble and the love and care he had expended on the last days of his life. No relative of the dead hero was found to neglect the hint given in the letter of the expense attending the keeping up of the Venetian palace, and the necessity for enabling the divine poet Aretino, the terror of wicked kings and dukes, the redresser of public wrongs—to maintain his modest hermitage on a respectable footing.

Even the pecuniary loss he sustained as the result of his own bringing about of a marriage between Marietta, one of his favourites, and his secretary Ambrosio, Aretino made up by blackmail. Some days after the wedding he despatched the newly-married man to Francis I, for six hundred crowns, promised by that monarch. He accompanied him some distance on his journey, slept at an inn that night; and on his return home next day, found his palace denuded of every crown, of every piece of plate, and of every valuable article of dress, left there twenty-four hours before. Marietta, as tired of her

new husband as she was of her old lover, had packed on a vessel, bound for Cyprus, all the precious movables she could, and taking as companion a cavalier dearer to her than Pietro or Ambrosio, had herself departed with them as super-cargo. To add to the loss and annoyance, Ambrosio returning with six-hundred crowns, lost them at play. Loss of money, however, was not in the category of things tolerated by Aretino. He wrote such a fierce letter to the church dignitary in whose house his secretary had lost the six hundred crowns, that, although the ecclesiastic was perfectly innocent in the transaction, he nevertheless took six hundred crowns out of his desk, and forwarded them to the unscrupulous satirist and poet.

“My servant,” wrote Aretino, in this fine specimen of a blackmailing epistle, “has lost a large sum at play at your house, and in your presence, a thing unworthy of a churl, much more of a cardinal. Surely, Monsignore, the friendship which has united me to Monsignore Luigi, to Messer Giovani, to Sinibaldi, and to you, merits recompense, and not assassination. But I am astonished that you should have failed in respect, Master Nicholas, not to me—not to me, Master Nicholas—but to this king, who has conferred glory on your unworthiness—to this king, whose liberality has exceeded your hopes. The present was in the royal purse when you seized on it. If you were a good prelate, you would entertain some sense of benefits received. I cannot help inflicting punishment on your evil proceeding, and this punishment will soon await you in a printed pamphlet. Meantime I kiss

the hands of your illustrious highness—I, who honour the rank dishonoured by you."

The only persons who really received disinterested kindness from Pietro were his many morganatic wives, and the painters with whom he was on friendly terms. With a soul so susceptible of pleasure from the beautiful faces and forms presented in the pictures of the great masters of his era, he could not but be interested in the creators of these forms of loveliness.

"His long and disinterested intimacy with Titian," writes Chasles, "is the only pure and noble phase of his life. As the same love of pleasure, of luxury, and of the table, ruled among the artists, Aretino, who admired their genius and sympathized with their peculiar feelings on the score of morals, was entirely happy among them. He roused their activity, he inflamed their passions, he flattered them, and he amused them, as he had Giovanni de Medicis, but with no expectation of any return except their friendship."

In the very mode of life in which Aretino had most sinned against his Creator, his neighbour and himself, he was at last punished. He that had lived only for the gratification of his vanity and his senses, and had scarcely felt a disinterested love or friendship for any human being, was, toward the end of his life, fated to feel the most intense attachment to one who cared not for him, and who deserted him, for a younger lover. This perfidy did not banish his infatuation. He continued to love her until her death; and sorrow

for her loss embittered all his after hours.

This frail instrument of vengeance on the man of many evils was called Perina Riicca,—a wife at fifteen, she avenged on this general lover all the wrongs and injuries he had ever inflicted on man or woman. Aretino's conduct and opinions had had their effect on her, and two years after he had induced her to quit a good husband, a young gallant induced her to quit him. Three years later she returned to him; but this time it was to die. No conduct on her part could diminish the irrational and boundless affection which continued to torment him during his after life—the only sincere and engrossing attachment which he had ever experienced.

Aretino died in Venice in the end of the year 1557, one authority attributing his death to a fall from a chair while laughing at a grotesque and not very edifying incident. From other accounts we gather that the public executioner had a hand in ridding his great patrons from all future annoyances on his part. The news at first seemed to all except his parasites and the great painters of his acquaintance, almost too good to be true. The supply of satirical epitaphs much exceeded the demand, many of them being to the import of the following:

*"Qui giace l'Aretin, amaro tosco
Del seme uman, la cui lingua trafisse
E vivi e morti: d'Iddio mal non disse,
E si seusso col dir, 'Io non conosco.'"*

Here lies Aretino, bitter poison
Of the human race, whose tongue lashed
The living and the dead. Of the Deity he spoke no
evil,
Excusing this with the words—"I do not know him."